

Consulting on public lands. European professions, models, and practices of public sector consulting

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The role played by consultancy firms in governmental work caused an unprecedented controversy in several European countries¹, as these firms took over parts of the development of health policies or the vast 'recovery plans' adopted in response to the pandemic emergency. The budgetary costs, the administrative opacity, or the forms of political capture that would result from this outsourcing to a few large firms – e.g. McKinsey or Accenture, which were entrusted by the French government with important missions relating to the management of the Covid pandemic-19 - have notably been the subject of strong criticism.

However, this phenomenon is already well documented. As early as the 1990s, C. Hood and M. Jackson (1991) popularised the term 'consultocracy' to describe the colonisation of public administrations by management consultants. In the wake of the transformation of certain large firms into networks of expertise at the heart of capitalist globalisation (Djelic 2004; McKenna, Djelic and Ainamo 2003), consulting services have imposed themselves over time as a legitimate form of intervention when it comes to working *for* and *with* national or international administrations (Villette, 2003; Seabrooke and Sending 2020). Considered either as the vectors of an isomorphism shaping public organisations in the image of managerial rationality models (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) or as 'agents of change' (Lapsley and Oldfield, 2001), whose interventions would have a much more open and uncertain outcome, consultants are now considered to be full-fledged actors in public sector activities. However, the focus on a few large Anglo-American firms working directly for ministerial cabinets conceals an extreme diversity of situations, skills, locations, and practices nowadays labelled as 'consultancy'. From the self-employed sectoral expert (or academic) to the *management consultants* belonging to international networks (Henry, 1993; Villette, 2003; Thine, 2006), public sector consulting remains ambiguous. Moreover, the tendency to take up the argument of an external 'capture' of public action by a few firms somehow obviates the analysis of *consultancy situations*, i.e. the content and format of this expertise, but also the relationships of complementarity and competition established with public agents at different administrative levels.

However, the present situation invites us to put *consulting* back at the centre of the questioning of political activity, and particularly its European dimension, which has remained

¹ See in the extensive journalistic output: 'Germany: 'l'affaire des consultants' secoue le ministère de la défense', Thomas Wieder, *Le Monde*, 31 January 2019 [online]; 'Recovery, polemica su McKinsey Il Mef: consulenza da 25 mila euro', Carmlo Lopapa, *La Repubblica*, 7 March 2021 [online]. "Coronavirus creates new priorities for consultants", Javier Espinoza, *Financial Times*, 17 April 2020 [online].

in the blind spot of studies on consultants' work. Indeed, while consulting has been the subject of global surveys (Boussebaa and Faulconbridge 2016; Morgan, Sturdy, and Quack 2006; Saint-Martin 2002, 2004), national case studies (Henry and Pierru 2012; Ylönen and Kuusela 2019) or sectoral case studies on law, public relations, planning and urban development (Bataille 2020; Korkea-aho 2021; Tyllström 2013), it has so far done little to explore the terrain of European public action. The figure of the *management consultant* does appear in the work of Christian Lahusen as one of the private 'permanents' of the field of European power (Georgakakis, 2013). Nevertheless, in social science research it has remained a vague category, more evoked than really analysed, and most often 'squashed' between the figures of the business lawyer (Avril 2020; Korkea-aho 2021) and the lobbyist (Courty 2018; Laurens 2015), who seem to reign at the periphery of the European institutions. This entails the risk of letting the long cohort of 'consultants' of all kinds (management, strategy, audit, etc.) and the increasingly diverse missions (programme design and evaluation, communication, technical or IT project management, etc.) slip under the radar. In fact, these consultancies now attract a significant proportion of young graduates from specialised masters' programmes and represent one of the most fashionable instances of professional and political socialisation in Europe (Michon 2019).

There is, however, a genuinely European history of *consulting* which makes it one of the very first laboratories of these new professions and knowledge of public affairs, especially under the managerialist turn of European administrations (Georgakakis, 2019). The development of complex public management systems (recruitment, internal management, policy design) and the generalisation of a 'project-based' funding policy (Büttner, Leopold, 2016) further strengthened the movement. Mirroring the *managerialisation of* European bureaucracies, the world of consultancies now operates 'under the EU mandate' and along its dense network of agencies, committees and directorates general across all sectors²; so that where there is European policy, there is a good chance of finding consultants and *consulting*. This can be seen in the 'partnership policies' that are being built - at national and European level - around the structural funds, where consultancies are involved in the whole chain of designing, managing and evaluating the related public investment programmes (Lebrou 2017). But we can also see it today at the very heart of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) submitted by the Member States in the framework of the *NextGenerationEU* plan, which systematically call upon, albeit differently depending on the national government, the large multinational consulting firms (Deloitte, McKinsey, EY, etc.) or more local structures.

Beyond this, consulting as a practice and a model seems to shape the very work of EU officials. One can refer first to the massive development since the 1990s of so-called 'conditionality' policies, leading the EU to strengthen its "technical assistance" function. These are linked to the preparation of enlargements (Bonnard and Robert 2020), to the policies of 'bailing out' indebted states in the wake of the euro crisis (Sacriste and Vauchez 2019), or to the payment of funds linked to investment plans (Juncker Plan, recovery plans, etc.) or to Cohesion Policy (Coman and Sbaraglia, 2018). In each case, they have led to the emergence of dedicated administrative entities which acting as consultants. Whether within the Commission, the European Investment Bank or the ECB, they work to strengthen the administrative and expert capacities of Member States. One thinks of the Commission's *Structural Reform Support Service* [SRSS] or the EIB's *Advisory Hub* - deploying the "consultancy" form at the heart of

² [This can be confirmed by a quick browsing on e-Tendering, the European public procurement portal \[online\] of European public procurement contracts for the provision of intellectual services.](#)

the assisted authorities (States, local authorities, parapublic actors), encouraged to hire service providers by the regulations and the financial envelopes intended for technical assistance. Consultants play a significant role, and one that is still little studied as such, in this vast field of 'EU-led public sector reforms' (Ongaro and Kickert 2020).

In short, the aim of this workshop is to engage in a historical and sociological reflection on the professions, figures, knowledge, and practices of consultancies in the field of European policymaking - at all the 'levels' (local, sectoral, national, European, etc.) where they are deployed. In this perspective, we would warmly welcome proposals focusing on EU-related consulting actors and sectors, as well as contributions underlining the transnational structuring of consulting firms or activities at the European level. While remaining open to other proposals, the workshop will be particularly interested in the following dimensions.

1. The European trajectory of *consulting*: professions, markets, and policies of a public sector business

This first dimension explores the role of the European power centre as a laboratory for the consolidation and dissemination of the professional model of *consulting*. The papers will explore the different temporalities as well as the conjunctures of emergence or reinforcement of the presence of the 'consultant', whether private or internal to the administrations, within or on the periphery of the European institutions: when does it appear as a legitimate form of intervention? What are the sectors and themes of public policy where it is being experimented with? To what extent have the European institutions themselves adopted the 'consultancy form' as a new instrument in their relations with members?

It will also be possible to reflect, for example, from the perspective of the sociology of professions or economic sociology, on the European markets and professions of *consulting*: its organisations, its autonomous dynamics, its forms of embedding and articulation with national and international spaces. The papers will be able to grasp them from the angle of more monographic surveys on consulting firms, more sectoral surveys on public action fields, or more prosopographical surveys by paying attention to social properties, training trajectories, 'public-private' circulation and reconversions, models of excellence, as well as to the forms of stratification specific to these professional worlds. Following the example of the work carried out in France by Odile Henry (1992) and Sylvain Thine (2006), contributions could also shed light on the diversity of these consulting worlds: whether they are international or local professionals, generalists or specialists in public action, "permanent" or "intermittent" European affairs professionals, young graduates fresh from *European studies* masters programmes or experienced former European civil servants, acting at the margins or at the centre of public policy-making. Communication proposals could also explore the question of the porosity of the borders with the worlds of lobbying, *advocacy* or interest representation, as well as the work undertaken by professional associations and large organisations to establish the legitimacy of the consultancy professions. The spatial dimension of consultants' work could also be addressed: where are the firms involved in European public action located? In the classic centres of the EU (Brussels, Luxembourg, certain national capitals) or in its periphery? What is the economic geography of these actors and organisations, as it has already been conceived for lobbyists (Laurens, Marchan, and Crieeking 2012; Van Crieeking et al. 2005).

Contributions could also empirically explore how consultancy is being justified and explained in an European public sector context, based on the vast literature which already studied the situations of consulting (Armbruster 2006; Bourgoin 2015). These include

'functionalism' (the consultant as a technical adjunct to an under-resourced European administration), the 'critical' approach (the consultant as a seller of an image of professionalism rather than a necessary service) and finally the 'pragmatic' approach (the consultant as a *translator* straddling the line between organisational principles and actual implementation). Which combination of the above are most likely to capture the European activity of consultants?

2. The 'commissioning' of European government. Partnerships and competition

This second dimension focuses on the knowledge of governments and the formats of expertise of consulting professionals. It aims to explore intervention situations from the perspective of the sociology of the forms of partnership and competition that are established with European public institutions and consultancy firms.

Following the example of analyses already undertaken at the level of states or in a comparative perspective (Poupeau, Guéranger, and Cadiou 2012), contributions would question more specifically the categories and knowledge of politics, and particularly of European politics, that are being developed in the consulting world - particularly in view of the development of large 'public sector'/'public affairs' departments in law firms. What forms of practical and theoretical knowledge of European government (and its 'public affairs') are emerging in these organisations, some of which first built their position on their expertise in the service of private organisations? What representations of politics (of its contours, limits, actors, etc.) and of Europe (of its dynamics, its legitimate forms, etc.) are valued? In mirroring this, is there a specificity of *small* firms of experts and thematic consultants, far away from the international fields of management and for whom European actors represent an exclusive clientele?

Based on an analysis of the products of consulting, potential contributions could also dive into the formats (*booklets*, etc.), jargons and models (*benchmarking*, etc.) as well as the common sense of reform that is being forged (proceduralisation, project-based logic, forms of delegitimisation of partisan actors and the knowledge of public professionals, preference for privatisation and forms of private self-regulation, etc.). It could also be relevant to assess opposite, fragmented situations, where a very local or thematic expertise can structure administrative practices at a distance from the large international firms (Lebrou, 2015).

The proposals could also analyse *situations of* intervention by consultants in certain European policies and the work of 'consulting' public action undertaken at European level as well as in the Member States. Are they full-fledged actors in the decision-making process or is their action reduced to being an element of *ex-post* legitimisation via the types of private certification of professionalism and bureaucratic good form that they return and sell (Kipping 2011)? What permanencies and rearrangements are observed when consultants are involved? What new alliances are being forged at the interface of the public and the private? What forms of competition, resistance or partnership with European political and administrative actors? In analysing the forms of symbolic and material exchange at work in these public-private partnerships, we could also question the *pro-bono* side of the consultants' activity in the form of intellectual productions (articles, seminars, etc.) or de-commercialised missions with a high symbolic value or likely to generate 'moral added value' (Bosvieux-Onyekwelu 2020).

3. The legitimacy of consulting in question. Controversies, criticisms and trials of the outsourcing of intellectual services.

This third and final axis dimension aims at understanding the criticisms and controversies created by the extensive use of consulting in European public administrations. These criticisms, sometimes radical, are not only produced 'outside' the organisations producing and receiving the expertise but also 'inside' them.

The recent politicisation of the use of consultancy firms finally leads to the questioning of the conditions of their legitimacy with European and national bureaucracies. It should not be forgotten that the President of the Commission was herself the subject of a lawsuit in Germany for excessive recourse to consultancy firms during her time at the Ministry of Defence³. Since the beginning of the pandemic crisis, there has been a growing criticism of private consultancy bureaucracies (particularly the Big 4) which act as auxiliaries to the state without taking direct responsibility for public action. This is particularly the case in France, where some civil servants and trade unionists have, for example, recently created a collective called "Our Public Services", which is focused on criticising the outsourcing of public tasks, including design and intellectual services entrusted to consultants⁴. Beyond the criticism of "*bullshit jobs*" that David Graeber already pointed out when he denounced fuzzy, jargonous and hollow knowledge, it is above all the thesis of "capture" that dominates the public debate.

What is the situation at the European level? The contributions may focus either on these criticisms themselves or on the answers provided by the consultants and their clients to explain and justify the use of such external advice. In the same vein, it will also be a question of examining the European registers of criticism, based on an analysis of cases and trials and by following the levers (parliamentary committees, European Court of Auditors, European *Ombudswoman*, NGOs and critical associations). In this perspective, the proposals could, for example, be based on an analysis of the rich corpus of websites, series (*Parliament*, etc.), novels (*La clé USB* by J.P Toussaint, *La Capitale* by Robert Menasse, etc.) on the 'Brussels bubble' to grasp the diffuse forms of this criticism. In these critical and politicised contexts of recourse to consultancy, they may also be interested in the forms of reflexivity of the consultants themselves about their profession, its legitimacy, and the political effects of their action.

Far from being the prerogative of external advocacy, such criticism could also come from the European civil service and other parts of the European polity. Finally, contributions could detail, in a symmetrical way, the forms of reflexivity of the consultants themselves with regard to their intervention or their legitimacy. How, and in the name of what, do these people or groups "resist to" consulting? What effects do these criticisms and potential resistances have on the ordinary lives of the actors who bear them, and those who are the targets? We therefore invite the contributors to explore the foundations and practices of the criticisms of consulting, as well as the resistances that they can feed, from the most discreet to the most visible.

Practical information:

³ Ursula von der Leyen, then minister of defence, paid more than €200 million to consultancies between 2015 and 2016 - more than a quarter of what all external consultants cost between 2014 and 2018 - for various consulting contracts (half of which the German Court of Auditors said did not follow standard tendering procedures).

⁴ "160bn outsourced each year - How public authorities are undermining their own ability to act", French collective for "Our Public Services", 2021 [online].

- Proposals for contributions (one page in English or French) should be sent by 30 April 2022 to the following address (colloque.consultantseurope@protonmail.com). The organisers will announce the results of their selection work by 15 May 2022;
- Papers and presentations (in English or French) are due by 5 September 2022;
- The workshop will be held in Paris on 14 and 15 September 2022.

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